

Halo 2: Descent of High Charity

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Category: Halo

Genre: Adventure

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2005-03-30 02:42:44

Updated: 2005-06-15 01:39:52

Packaged: 2016-04-27 00:52:10

Rating: T

Chapters: 11

Words: 14,562

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: After the In Amber Clad is captured by the Flood and crashes inside High Charity, how will two humans survive in the warzone? NOW FINISHED

1. In Amber Clad

I kneeled behind a barricade, observing the armory casually. Most of the lighting systems in the _In Amber Clad_ had been shut down, but a single overhead light lit the interior of this makeshift defensive position. Six of my fellow Marines were in positions facing the shut door that led into Commons A-04.

About half an hour ago, the UNSC vessel had landed just behind Sentinel Wall, and the commander had left the ship with over a hundred Marines to be deployed throughout the Wall. We haven't gotten word from Miranda Keyes, but garbled reports of enemy encounters could be heard over the communicator systems.

And now something was happening on the ship. It started just after the Containment Shield around this 'Library' thing was lowered - creatures were entering the vessel. I, nor any of the other Marines, knew exactly how it was being done, but the point was _they were getting in_. Even now, the squad located in security station B-02 came over the comm, saying: "We're reporting contact in all engine rooms, hangar C-01 and B-04, and security stations A-01 through A-05."

_Damn, _I thought. Security station A-03 was on the other side of Commons A-04. Right next to us. My thoughts were suddenly accompanied by a barking, guttural sound beyond the closed blast door. One of the privates started visibly shaking.

"God dammit, Tyson, keep yourself still and try not to wet yourself!" I murmured to him. He frantically tried to steady his weapon, whispering, "Yessir."

The radio chattered again. At first, I could only hear static, but then a human voice came through. It was eerily calm, and with this evidence I guessed it came from Sergeant Major ZoÃ« Stevens, a good friend of mine. The moment recognized her, a feeling of loss swept through my body. "Command, this is security station B-01. My entire squad is down " - there was a sound of two shotgun blasts - "and these monsters are everywhere. I suggest reinforcing nearby defensive points. I'll hold here as long as I can." Another shotgun blast, and then silence.

I slammed my fist against the barricade. Nearby me was a table with an assortment of weapons lain across it: two SMGs, a shotgun, battle rifle, and a couple of frag grenades. I took the two sub-machine guns and pointed them at the blast door.

The highest-ranking officer in the room stood up a few minutes later, after a tense silence. His name was Second Lieutenant Doug Daniels, who was lucky enough to remain on our little pleasure-cruise yacht, instead of outside in what looked to be a rapidly-escalating living hell. "You heard the Marine. We better prepare for battle, 'cause however they got into security B-01, they'll probably do the same to us. Get your weapons and steady your nerves," he said, just before something started clanging on the air vent.

The vent fell open, and something with four limbs and a head dropped out. It landed with a crunch on the floor, and my two SMGs were already trained on it. Daniels had done the same with his BR55 battle rifle, and Private Tyson was screaming hysterically. Another Marine silenced him with some choice words.

I stepped forward and poked the thing. It appeared to be a human corpse, with some blood staining the fatigues. Slowly, I flipped it over and stared at the face: it was Sergeant Major Stevens. I pulled off her helmet, and gently inspected the corpse for cause of death.

"Flip her back over," Daniels suggested. I did so, revealing a hole wide enough to fit my finger in the back of her neck. I grimaced.

"Reminds me of a spinal tap," Daniels said, kneeling down beside me. "I wonder what happened?" He looked up at the vent, and told Tyson to close it. _I wonder how she got into the air vent_, I thought.

I picked up her limp body and set her down on a shining stainless steel table in the corner of the room. For a moment, I looked at the sergeant major, thinking of the days when the Marines weren't in combat with the Covenant.

The radio spiked, and the voice of the commanding officer on the bridge, an Orbital Drop Shock Trooper by the name of Colonel Jen Gregory, filtered into the armory, "Attention! All non-combat personnel, report to your assigned bunking quarters. Marines: begin guard shifts. Get some sleep, and the commander should be back soon enough."

Well enough, I thought, laying down next to the barricade. Daniels looked around the room and ordered Corporal Seoll to begin guard duty. Watching the Marines with one eye, I felt a wave of exhaustion fall over me; I hadn't gotten sleep since Earth had come under

attack. Finally, I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

It was Private Tyson's shift, and all had been quiet so far, except for the occasional roar of the things outside. I was still asleep, laying next to the barricade.

Occasionally, Tyson heard a small scratching sound coming from inside the armory, but he couldn't pinpoint it. With terror beginning to well up inside him, the young private back into a corner, next to the corpse on the table.

Suddenly, a pallid hand pressed over his mouth. He attempted to scream, but his head was twisted violently to the side, resulting in a broken neck. Tyson's head lolled to the side gruesomely. Standing up from behind him was Sergeant Major Stevens, with tentacles sprouting from very unlady-like places. Her eyelids were now fused to her skull, with vein-looking things masking her face. Four large, sharp tentacles were growing from her left hand.

Slowly, with a limping step, the sergeant walked to the blast door and pressed a button to the side. There was a beep, and the bulkhead opened with a swish. I awoke, leaping to my feet just as a wave of aliens entered the room. The Marines were scrambling to their feet, but small little blobs with tentacle-like feet were scuttling up the humans' backs and delving a long pincer into their necks.

Daniels stood beside me, with his battle rifle up and firing. I grabbed a nearby Magnum and shot at the bipedal creatures, ones that resembled severely mutilated humans. "Lieutenant, we need to get out of here. Forget about the Marines," I warned. The large ones were directing their attentions toward us.

Without further ado, I turned and ran. A moment later, Daniels joined me as we threw ourselves into the lift. I slammed my fist into the down button repeatedly, while the lieutenant covered me. Finally, the lift doors shut we began to descend.

"Where are we going?" Daniels gasped.

"Bridge, hopefully."

"Bridge is up, corporal."

"Shit."

We descended silently, myself occasionally hitting the up button distractedly. Finally, the lift slowed to a stop, and a few seconds later there was a wet smack, as if something organic had fallen from the armory and just landed on top of the lift. The doors opened, revealing a hall into a recreation area. It was empty, except for a smattering of human and alien blood on the walls. I hit the up button again, wishing that we were fighting the Covenant.

2. The Bridge

Again, the lift started, heading upwards. At about mid-trip, I muttered, "It's like one of those old-fashioned horror movies. They are going up the elevator, and it stops, and the creatures come in through the opening in the top . . ." We both looked up. A suspicious

green liquid was beginning to drip onto the floor.

We stopped on the bridge level. The doors opened, and we stepped through. The halls were dark, the lights flickering, but the enemy apparently hadn't arrived here yet. Daniels took point, holding his battle rifle in a ready stance. I regretted taking only the Magnum; it wouldn't do much good.

Daniels stopped at the corner, and peeked around the bend. "Holy shit," he whispered. I poked my head out. It was another lift, or had been. The walls around it were covered in sticky red blood. It appeared that a lift had arrived and two humans had exploded. The lift was no where to be found, but a broken cord in the shaft was failing to look innocent.

"Keep moving. They'll be up that shaft any moment now, and I don't want to be around when they do," I admitted. Daniels nodded, and we proceeded down the corridors, following the pointing arrows on the floor that told the directions. After a few minutes of wondering the hallways, we came to an area where the lighting was working. A final arrow, saying 'BRIDGE' pointed toward a bulkhead on the other side of the room. A few plants in pots decorated the bleak chamber.

We walked quickly to the bridge. Daniels banged heavily on the blast door, saying, "This is Second Lieutenant Daniels. Our position was overrun a few minutes ago. Open the doors, please."

There was a brief pause, and I supposed they were checking the camera that was positioned conspicuously in the corner of the ceiling. The doors pulled back, and we entered the bridge.

Terminals and computers were everywhere. I had been here once or twice before, so I wasn't surprised. Some techs remained at their positions, some sleeping, and a few Marines stood guard. The colonel sat in the captain's chair, swiveling and humming animatedly. I blinked once or twice, and trotted to the weapons station to exchange my Magnum for something more powerful. Daniels walked to the camera station.

After selecting two SMGs, putting the Magnum in my belt with a few extra clips, and strapping an old MA5B Individual Combat Weapons System assault rifle to my back, I walked up the most sensible-looking person on the bridge: a woman in her twenties, wearing the standard grey unisex uniform of a bridge officer. Her hair was tied back in a bun, but despite that hair-do's fierce reputation that associated it with uptight librarian, she was still very pretty.

"Yes, Marine?" She said, turning towards me.

My cheeks flushed embarrassingly. "Yeah, um, do you know what we're fighting?" I asked, trying to remember why I had initially come up to her.

She cocked her head to the side and smiled knowingly, in the manner that women do. Beckoning, the officer led me to the camera stations. Daniels was gone now, probably getting some Z's before the aliens arrived.

"You are?" She asked, as we walked the floor of the

bridge.

"Corporal Nathan Price, ma'am."

"Charmed, I'm sure. Alicia Hartman. I'm an ensign, just got assigned to the In Amber Clad a few days before Earth was attacked." I nodded.

We arrived at the camera consoles. Alicia pointed to one, just under the top right view screen. It showed Commons A-01, where several of the creatures lumbered about. She pointed to the smallest of the three different things.

"We got a communication from Commander Keyes' squad a while ago. She managed to send us some information from the Forerunner databanks.

"They are called Flood. Apparently, the Pillar of Autumn's crew encountered them on the last Halo, where the shipboard AI got some info on them, too. The smallest, these ones," she pointed again, "are called Infection Forms, the largest entity the Flood can create without directly using another's biomass. These use the bodies of their victims as hosts, and thus becoming Combat Forms." She pointed at the bipedal creatures I had encountered earlier. "They are the rapidly transformed from their former selves, and the host's brain is chemically shut down except for autonomic systems, keeping the body technically 'alive' as it is converted and used. The Flood has access to everything in the victim's body, including memories and skills.

"The final phase of the Flood's life cycle is the Carrier Form. It is created by using hosts of insufficient biomass, such as Grunts, Jackals, or Drones, or by Combat Forms too damaged to be of any use. The Carrier Form always has several Infection Forms within its interior. They explode when near a victim, releasing the spores and sometimes disabling the victim."

"I've seen some Combat Forms that look like humans. Can they only use humans?" I asked.

"No, they can use Elites, too.

I paused, and she looked up, studying me. I tried not to blush, and I was getting frustrated with myself very quickly because of that. This Alicia was having an adverse effect on me.

Suddenly, a tech ran up. "Ma'am, I think the colonel's lost it. I can't get into contact with any of the remaining security stations, and the non-combat personnel bunk areas are silent. Most of the cameras have been shut down in those areas, too."

I took a step toward the tech. "I saw a broken lift shaft on the way here. The Flood could easily crawl up that, if you ask me."

"I'll check the cameras," the tech said, obviously one that didn't trust Marines very well. I turned away, glancing at the ensign; her face was set in a determined grimace. I stepped away from her, and began to reconnoiter the bridge. If we were going to come under attack, self-preservation was at the top of my list, and I would need a place to hide if the ship was taken over.

3. High Charity

The air on the bridge was smothered in tension. I coughed, staring at Colonel Gregory, who was now completely insane. Or in the green little pastures beyond insanity. He still sat in the captain's chair, muttering, "Deployed been have Oh-Dee-Ess-Tees the."

We had just lost contact with the final security station, one floor below. I was sure they were using the air vents and lift shafts to get around; we could hear tiny feet scampering around the walls and ceiling, like mice. Occasionally, something went _smack _against the blast door.

Tearing my gaze away from the colonel, who was now investigating his boot, I glanced around the bridge. Lieutenant Daniels, holding a BR55 battle rifle, kneeled behind a barricade in the standard defense strategy against a rush, his weapon aimed at the doorway. I remember doing the same on both Cairo Station and at the armory just a few hours ago.

Alicia Hartman, the ensign, was adjusting a M41 SSR MAV/AW rocket launcher. Informally known as the Spanker. I stared for a moment, before a ripping sound tore my gaze away. The screech was coming from the blast door " it was literally being torn in two. Small Infection Forms were bursting through the opening, and were met by a tide of gunfire. They popped like balloons getting acupuncture.

Following them was a tide of Combat Forms. I aimed by two SMGs and held the trigger until the magazine was empty. I wasn't in immediate danger from my position, two rows behind Daniels, but I could already see that these things were going to get through fast. The el-tee was backing up as two Marines went down near him.

The Combat Forms leapt over the first barricade, converging on the second. I looked closer, and saw that these Flood were wielding weapons as well. Daniels went down from two Magnum shots; I quickly reloaded the SMGs.

The second barricade went down, along with three Combat Forms. Green and red blood decorated the walls near the blast door. Marines were screaming in terror and agony, barely audible over the sound of gunfire.

Alicia fired a rocket, slowing the Flood advance. My self-preservation sense was tingling; I turned and ran behind the Marine lines, taking a handful of Alicia's sleeve as I fled toward my chosen "Pull-Back Point" as I called it.

I ducked within the maintenance closet, dragging the girl inside. She inhaled sharply, and screamed, "What the hell are you trying to do?"

"Staying out there will just get both of us killed."

"Coward!"

An hour passed. I had blocked the doorway, and Alicia was fuming in

the opposite corner of the closet. It had taken all of my willpower and most of my strength to keep her from charging outside.

About fifteen minutes after the bridge fell, I felt the familiar feeling of the ship jumping into slipspace. And now, the ship had come out of slipspace, but I wasn't sure where. And now, I was summoning the courage to open the door.

"Corporal Price! Open the blasted door!"

I pulled off the makeshift blocks: an automatic sweeper and duster, a few old-fashioned mops, and a bucket. Twisting the knob, I slowly pushed open the door. Beyond, the bridge was empty, and lacking of all corpses, dead, alive, both, or neither. There was a beeping from one of the consoles; Alicia trotted up to it. "Someone's hailing us," she said, "but the console's broken. I can't reply."

"Can you see who it is?" I asked.

"Says, 'HIGH CHARITY/ ANOMALY: CORTANA'"

"Cortana . . . That name sounds familiar." I mused.

"Oh, crap," Alicia suddenly cried, "The Flood programmed the _In Amber Clad_ to crash into a tower _inside_ a Covenant ship."

I suddenly remembered something I had seen outside a window on the _In Amber Clad_ earlier that day: a huge Covenant "worldship", along with a massive fleet.

"Does it say what the ship is called?"

She pressed a button. "Yeah. 'High Charity'."

"Where are we now?" I asked, slowly turning towards the viewscreens. Outside was a sprawling city, with a huge lighted structure in the middle. But not like a city from earth: it was a Covenant city, I realized. But there was no sky, either, just a purple 'ceiling' that stretched on and on. Towers lined the city; we rapidly passed between two, and I could see four human figures below.

I started. "Wait! Did you see that?"

"See what?" Alicia said dazedly, still staring at the scene.

"Humans!" I ran to a terminal, and tapped a few random buttons. The viewscreens zoomed in on the figures, and I immediately recognized one of them: the Master Chief, a Spartan. The other three were Marines.

Alicia shook her head. "There's an emergency lifeboat down the hall, reserved for the bridge crew. We should get out of here, _quick_ â€" she pointed at another viewscreen, which showed a rapidly approaching tower.

We were out the door in a few seconds. I held the assault rifle at shoulder height, scanning the halls for any sign of the Flood. I inquired about this.

Alicia rounded a corner, heading towards the lifeboat. "I would guess that they are gathering in the hangars. If they can program the _In Amber Clad_, they can probably fly a Pelican out of here."

We arrived at the lifeboat. She tapped a few buttons on a keypad near the door until it opened. The two of us filed in, and the ensign jumped into the pilot's seat, immediately working the controls.

Crap, I thought, as we burst forward.

4. Perfect Landing

Disclaimer: I don't own Halo, Halo 2, or anything in Halo or Halo 2.

The engine of the lifeboat roared to life, and we shot out of the _In Amber Clad_. I was strapped into one of the chairs, so I couldn't see through the pilot's viewport â€" I just gritted my teeth, gripped the barf bag, and stared straight ahead.

As the g-forces escalated, I soon found myself being pulled to the left, and I managed a glance outside: the lifeboat was speeding by one of the towers, and another one was directly ahead. I found myself wondering where Alicia would land, but was distracted by the feeling of my face being dragged off.

A few minutes of torture later, she cried, "The momentum of being launched off the _In Amber Clad_ is causing us to go too fast . . . Just to warn you, we may hit the next tower."

I gulped as the small lifeboat began to rock violently. Suddenly, the ensign fired the reverse thrusters, sending me flapping to the other side of the seat like a rag doll. I heard a few bones popping, and I gulped again.

"Uhh . . . hold on." She muttered, barely audible over the roar of the engine. The lifeboat decelerated, and I got another glimpse out the viewport: one huge purple tower was all I could see. Alicia continued, "We are probably going to knock it. Hold on tight."

Again, she fired the reverse thrusters and the port thrusters, and I was jolted into the side of my seat. The engine began to scream from stress (so did I, but the ensign ignored me) as we hurtled toward the tower. Slowly, I felt the lifeboat begin to drift toward the right â€" starboard â€" but a moment later, we hit the tower on the port side of the lifeboat.

For a half-second a horrible screeching filled my ears, and then the lifeboat rocked and spun away. The whole thing was spinning â€" vertigo washed over me, just before my head hit the "cushioned" seat with such force that I fainted. I came around a few seconds later, just as Alicia Hartman called, "I'm going to right the lifeboat. Hold on." Oh, I was already doing that, plenty well. My knuckles gripped the support bars until they were white; my eyelids were peeled back; my heart beat like the drummer of an ancient rock-and-roll band.

Alicia fired all eight thrusters at once. I closed my eyes as the craft jolted and seemed to stop midair while speeding along at 300 kilometers per hour. When I opened them, we were cruising along at break-neck speed, heading toward the floor of High Charity.

"We're still coming in too fast!" She called. It felt distinctly like one of those old video games: The hero, speeding down from a doomed space ship, heading toward certain doom in a crash on an ancient and unknown world . . . Of course, this was still a vessel, but it was a big vessel.

I leaned forward and stared out the viewport. I could see the huge structure in the center of city: it looked almost like an ancient Egyptian pyramid. Bright lights made it glow, so it appeared to govern the whole of High Charity. When the In Amber Clad had arrived at the ring-world Delta Halo, I had overheard the Master Chief in conversation about the Covenant leaders. I had been with him for a while as he tried to kill the "Prophet of Regret", but I left him before he reached the main temple. I wondered if this huge building in the center of the city was where the Prophets reigned.

A jolt interrupted my reverie, and I saw that we were now incredibly close to the ground. Alicia righted the lifeboat as we hurtled down a long, narrow street. A moment later the bottom of the lifeboat skimmed the ground, and we hopped into the air. Hartman cut the acceleration engines, engaged the reverse thrusters, and deployed what landing gear the lifeboat had. Suddenly, the craft spun to the side and we began flipping and spinning " I screamed again as the small ship started to slow.

It felt like hours before we stopped with a clang. I was dripping from sweat, and the lifeboat was upside-down. Smoke was filtering into the tiny room as the engine fell apart; the emergency light shut off and the sealed weapons locker came open, dumping our gear onto the floor. I disengaged myself from the seat and crumpled to the floor, breathing hard.

After a few moments of bliss, Alicia grabbed my arm and dragged me up. Without a word, she picked up an M6C Magnum and a BR55 Battle Rifle. I hoisted the MA5B assault rifle I had found on the In Amber Clad, and an M7/Caseless Sub Machine Gun. The two of us pushed open the door and walked outside. The street was barely lit, but I could see three weaponless Grunts staring at us in terror. I hopped forward and seized one; it screamed in alien horror. Clutching it close to me, I asked, "Where are we?"

The Grunt stammered in perfect English, "The lower districts of H-High Charity!" It was so panicky I could easily hear the extra exclamation point.

Alicia pushed me away from the Grunt. Surprisingly, it didn't run, though its two buddies had disappeared. In a soothing voice, she said, "What can you tell us about this place?"

"High Charity is the f-flagship of the Covenant fleet. The Prophets came here to activate Halo, and begin the Great Journey " "

"What's going on here? I saw fighting when we passed over the towers." I looked up, and, indeed, I could see plasma blasts and streams of plasma rifle fire come out of the open areas of the only

tower we could see. The others were hidden by the prefabs that surrounded the street.

The Grunt, too, glanced up at the towers. "The Sanghelli â€"

"The what? Use our terms." Alicia interrupted impatiently.

"The _Elites_ rebelled against the Prophets. Some of the Grunts â€" us â€" joined them, along with the mighty Hunters."

I gasped. I had been fighting the Covenant for a long time â€" since five years before the fall of Reach â€" and couldn't believe the Elites might soon be helping us. "Who are the Elites fighting?"

"The Prophets, and the beings that remained loyal to the Covenant â€" the Brutes, Jackals, and Drones."

Suddenly, a sonic boom echoed over the city, and I heard a voice say over some alien intercom system, "The Elites are retreating to the mausoleum. Fools! Their Arbiter can do nothing for them now." Of course, I had no idea what that meant.

"What is your name?" Alicia continued, taking no notice of the sonic boom or the announcement.

"Torffel. Do you need something of me? Please â€" spare me, I've never fought the humans â€""

The ensign glanced at me. "We won't kill you, but we need you to guide us to a dropship." Torffel nodded, and, wasting no time, turned and began to trot away. The two of us followed. The small Grunt headed down the street, and I soon had a clear view of the other towers. In one of them, I could see the _In Amber Clad_, mangled from its crash. I frowned and felt a wave of sorrow come over me: I had liked that ship. The enormoussness of our situation suddenly came over me: We were stuck in the deepest of enemy territory, with no way of escape; the Flood could very well be in here with us; Miranda Keys was probably dead, all the Marines on the _In Amber Clad_ were dead . . .

I whispered to Alicia, "What are we going to do now?"

"We'll find a way out. Get a dropship, fly ourselves out of here â€""

"What about the Flood? If they are still in the _In Amber Clad_, this whole ship could be taken over soon. If that happens, they can get anywhere in the galaxy!"

Alicia's hand leapt out and grabbed the Grunt's shoulder, and she turned toward me. "Remember the story about the Master Chief and Halo? How he destroyed it? If they escape into High Charity, we'll returned to our ship and detonate the reactors, just like he and Cortana did last time."

I remembered what I had seen right before we got in the lifeboat. "The Master Chief might be on High Charity, too! I think I saw him when we were on the bridge."

"If you did, we might be able to get his or Cortana's help." Her

brown eyes drifted to the towers. I watched her carefully, and felt rather un-Marine-ly feelings. Ignoring that part of my brain and body, I stepped forward and grinned. "Shall we?"

Alicia smiled, and the two of us returned to following the Grunt through the lower districts.

5. Unlikely Ally

"In here, humans, in here," the diminutive Grunt Torffel beckoned us at the threshold of a Covenant sliding door. It all seemed like a cheap sci-fi movie to me: all the purple, sliding doors, and grav lifts.

I trotted after him, still holding my MA5B close. Alicia had holstered her weapons and strapped the BR55 to her back, but who could trust a four-foot-nothing?

The Grunt scampered in, and we found ourselves overlooking the Covenant "Holy City". The Grunt had led us through the lower districts and up one of the towers. Thanks to the grav lifts, I was sick and we had made it here in less than ten minutes.

I glanced backward at Alicia, who had been quiet throughout the entire journey. She seemed pretty dark ever since the bridge incident. Now, she stepped out onto the platform we now stood on and immediately glanced at one of the towers. I followed her gaze to the _In Amber Clad_, where a stream of Pelicans was descending on the city.

Ah shit, I thought with feeling. Marines couldn't be in those Pelicans.

"Torffel!" I cried. "Is there a dropship around here?"

"Yes, human â€" Phantoms are docked here to refuel. The mighty Arbiter once walked here â€"

"Yeah, yeah, your mighty orbital . . ." I interrupted, looking around. "Where are the Phantoms?" All I could see was two Elite bodies with dropped plasma rifles and three Jackals that looked like they had been shot extensively post-mortem.

"Uh . . ." Mumbled the Grunt, looking around. I could see he was panicking again.

The platform was in the shape of a half-circle, jutting out of the tower. Three large docking ports adorned the ledge, each with a small interface. I walked up to one, hopping over a puddle of Jackal as I did, and inspected the interface. It was purple, of course, and made up of a smattering of symbols. I hit one, and it beeped negatively. I hit another: same result. Torffel and Alicia walked up to me, and the Grunt squeaked, "You hit the button that says 'Disengage.'"

Irritated, I turned on him. "What button _should_ I hit?"

The Grunt thrust its head forward and examined the console. "Well," he said condescendingly, "it's obvious that there's no Phantom here.

This interface is of no use."

I frowned, and suddenly heard the whir of an approaching Pelican. "Uh-oh," I muttered, just as the Pelican came into view around two-dozen meters away from the dock. It circled around, and began accelerating toward us. I yelped, grabbed Alicia's arm and fled. Torffel followed us as fast as his squat legs could carry him: not fast enough. The Pelican crashed into the dock, immediately screeching and sliding. One wing connected with a canister of the fuel source used to power the Covenant dropships, obviously volatile. The explosion sent bits and pieces of alien material spiraling through the air, and what remained of the Pelican's wing set fire.

I stopped at the threshold of the door into the tower. Turning, I watched with horror as the Pelican careened toward us. Another explosion caught Torffel and threw him against the bulkhead; his limp body dropped to the ground. The Pelican slid to a stop against the wall.

"Nathan!" Alicia cried. "We've got to get out of here!" Removing the BR55 from its strap, she led the way into the tower. I glanced once more at the Pelican, just as a human Combat Form stumbled out of it. I turned and followed her hurriedly.

My heart leapt as the lights suddenly flickered. I could hear the voice of a Prophet over the alien intercom; Torffel had explained to me earlier that the speaker was the Prophet of Truth. Now, he mumbled something inaudible, and a darker and deeper voice bellowed, "_Your deaths will be instantaneous . . . while we shall suffer . . ._" I couldn't hear what the voice said last.

"Where are we going?" I gasped. The ensign didn't answer, but eventually we came into a large artificial valley, open to the "sky" above. Below, six Elites were crouched with their hands on their necks, and a dozen furred bipedal giants hovered behind them. Most held the Covenant grenade launcher, the Brute Shot, and it was obvious this was an execution. I assumed the hairy ones were Brutes.

As Alicia and I watched, one Elite in white armor was summoned from the group to watch the executions. Five Brutes stepped up behind each crouched Elite while two restrained the white-armored one. The simian alien brought the blade of the Brute Shot down and up in an arc that slashed the spine of each Elite; they fell, dead. The leader, the white-armored one, roared and attempted to shake off the Brutes, but they quickly redoubled their strength.

My heart thudded in my chest as another cry rent the air: an inhuman, or inalien, shriek. Another Pelican passed over our heads, and suddenly dozens of Combat Forms and Infection Forms appeared over the sides of the valley. The Brutes began firing on them, but the Infection Forms easily overwhelmed them. The Elite managed to escape, thanks to his shields, and headed our way. I yelped and tried to run, but Alicia restrained me.

"Wait! The Elite might help us!" she said hopefully.

"Oh, no, no, no," I stammered, "You don't know Elites like I do. I've fought them, I've killed them, I've seen them kill; the point is: they don't like humans!"

"Well, he's weaponless, anyway," Alicia Hartman argued, raising her Battle Rifle.

I crawled away, into the grass. The Elite ran up the hill, breathing hard, and I leapt at him as he ran past. Grabbing the alien around the waist, I brought him to the ground and pointed my MA5B at his head. The Elite struggled and then lay back, obviously exhausted. "Humans!" it growled.

"Yeh, humans," I growled back.

Alicia also pointed her BR55 at the Elite. "We need to find a way out of here, and you're gonna help us. Got it?"

"Why would I do that, human? I can easily kill both of you and escape alone." It glared at the ensign, and I poked it in the helmet with my weapon.

"We've got the guns, and you have no weapon," she continued.

"Ha! Your weak bullets cannot pierce by shields!" It snarled back.

"Wanna bet?" I threatened.

Alicia glanced down the hill, where the Flood had not yet spotted them. "We don't have time for this. Either accept our offer and live, or we'll throw you back to the Flood."

The Elite broke. "No, not the parasite . . ." It sighed. "The Covenant is broken, and we Sangheili are now the enemies of the Prophets. There is nothing I can lose now from allying with the humans . . ." It added to itself.

"What can we call you?" Alicia asked, pulling me back. I did not lower my weapon, but Alicia thrust her Magnum forward.

The Elite stood up, and accepted the Magnum. "Sortan is what my fellow Elites called me. I was once an Ultra, just one rank before a fleet commander . . ." He reminisced.

Now, the three of us began marching back into the tower. I whispered the Alicia angrily, "This is the second alien you've gotten to come along with us. Do you have some magical power for assimilating Covenant scum?"

She glared at me. "We need help if we're going to survive here. If the whole place is against us, we're good as dead."

At that moment Sortan led us through a door and straight into a lumbering Combat From. He immediately fired on it, and it turned, swinging its tentacle-arm. It smacked against Sortan's shields, and while the Elite stumbled back I fired my MA5B into it. The heavy slugs tore the creature to pieces. Sortan recovered and we continued into the next area: a very long bridge, covered with alien corpses. I was surprised when I stepped in a small puddle of sticky, red blood.

"Humans have been here!" I cried.

"Yes," confirmed Sortan, "this is the path to the Mausoleum of the Arbiters. The Demon itself fought here . . ."

"Who is that?" I asked ignorantly.

"The Master Chief," Alicia hissed.

"The Brutes and the Elites fought here, also, in the climax of our battle," Sortan continued. "The battle ended inside the mausoleum."

Suddenly, the sound of thunder echoed across High Charity. We turned toward the structure in the center of the city, the lighted one, as it slowly lifted upwards. As I watched, a huge green conduit broke off of it, and the vessel escaped through a gap in the ceiling.

"The Prophet of Truth is escaping! That means High Charity is doomed," muttered Sortan.

"Where is he going?" I asked.

"To Earth, to finish what the Covenant started. The Prophet is going to activate the six remaining Halos, and begin the Great Journey."

I grimaced. Alicia added, "And eradicate the galaxy of life-forms."

"Yes," Sortan agreed. "Our Arbiter has enlightened us. The Brutes are still misguided, and that is why they must be destroyed."

"Cut the holy crap," I growled angrily. "How are we going to get off this blasted ship?"

Sortan growled at me, but kneeled down and picked up a Plasma Rifle. "We can hope to find a Phantom, though I doubt any remain. We could attempt to capture one of your Pelicans, and fly out of here, though the Flood control most of them. Or, we could return to the human vessel and escape in one of the ships in it."

"What is the best way?" I asked.

"I doubt any of the Flood's Pelicans would be intact once we captured it, and I'm sure most of the Phantoms are gone. We should move through the towers and get to your ship," he replied.

Alicia stepped forward, slamming another clip into the Battle Rifle determinedly. "Let's go, then. How many towers away is it?"

"I would think one or two," Sortan answered, striding forward, hooves clicking on the surface of the bridge. I followed them, checking the ammunition on the assault rifle before I continued. Something told me the rest of the journey wouldn't be so easy.

6. The Mausoleum

I felt myself tense as our little squad strode up to the mausoleum entrance. Occasionally, High Charity shuddered, causing us to stumble. And now, as I watched, I could see lights flickering and

ending all over the city. An animal howling filled the air. Pelicans, delivering a parasitic cargo, swarmed the "sky".

The door opened with a dull beep, but it froze in mid-slide. Sortan, our alien guide, squeezed himself inside, plasma rifle raised. Alicia followed, and I trailed behind. My "survivalist" senses were definitely tingling â€" in other words, I was feeling extremely cowardly â€" as we entered.

Once inside the mausoleum, I exhaled. _Only dead bodies_, I told myself. _They won't get up and walk away. Yet._

The chamber was lit by hundreds of glowing panels that encircled the entire ceiling, and by a huge pod floating in the center of the room. Brute bodies were strewn throughout the halls; I wondered what had happened to the Elites, though I knew the answer.

"The mausoleum . . . of the Arbiters," gasped Sortan. "Those lights above us are the crypts of the Covenant's guardians."

The ship shuddered again, and the panels lighting the room flickered and died. I whimpered.

Suddenly, a holographic figure sprang up on a small little cylindrical table, one of the dozens I had seen throughout the towers. We moved closer, and Alicia seemed to recognize the figure. It flickered every now and then, repeating a message in a female voiceâ€" "_Hold on . . . picking up two more . . . transponders. Its . . . and Johnsonnnn . . ._" It began again.

"That's Cortana!" Alicia exclaimed.

"Well, she's not here," I intoned darkly, "and therefore no help in our precarious position."

"Shut up, corporal," Alicia ordered. "You never know, the Master Chief and Cortana may still be aboard."

"I doubt it," interjected Sortan, "the conduit guard â€" a group of Brutes â€" reported contact with the Demon just before they fell silent. I assume he is aboard the . . . vessel."

"See?" I muttered. "Cortana's gone, then, too."

Alicia Hartman glared at me. "Still, the first chance I get, I'll hack â€"

But a screech interrupted her. I sidestepped closer to Sortan, and felt disgusted with myself but I still didn't move. An eight-foot-tall alien warrior with a protective layer of tough shielding and a gun, while on your side, is very reassuring.

There were several thumps in the darkness. I jumped visibly as an explosion from the way we had come rocked the floor beneath us. "What was that?" I whispered.

"Should we go back out?" Alicia asked. Before anyone could answer, another shriek and the click-clack of hooved feet echoed throughout the chamber.

"We should run," Sortan advised, as the three of us slowly rotated with our backs to each other. "The door is on the opposite side of the chamber."

"Good idea," I agreed, hoisting my assault rifle and sprinting into the darkness. I ran into something wet with a smack, but immediately recovered and kept on my running, my heart beating faster than a bullet. Finally, I ran into the familiar surface of a Covenant doorway " but the panel was not lit. It was closed.

Breathing hard, I turned around and pointed my weapon into the darkness. I whimpered, again, as footsteps began to approach me. I tightened my hold on the trigger, just as the shape of Alicia hurtled out of the darkness, into the light projected by one of those little cylindrical tables. Her charge knocked the breath out of me; gasping, I tried to push her away and accidentally touched something I, as a man, was unacquainted with. I could just pick out the green-eyed glare she gave me.

After I regained my breath, I asked, "Where is Sortan?"

We both listened, and suddenly heard the scream of the Flood again. I heard the reassuring voice of the Elite " "Parasite!" " and a sudden light in the darkness.

Another familiar object: the dual-bladed Covenant Energy Sword. Gasping, Alicia and I watched as the blade flashed and slashed through the leathery skin of Flood Combat Forms. Quite a few launched themselves at him, barely visible in the meagre light cast by the sword. Only seven seconds passed before the Energy Sword's swings stopped " no more Combat Forms left. The sword moved toward us.

Sortan appeared in our little half-circle of light. He said nothing, and I read no discernable expression on his face. It was hard to tell, what with the mandibles and things.

"Sortan," Alicia said, "This door is shut down. How do we open it?"

The Elite deactivated the Energy Sword, which retreated into its hilt, like one of those sabers from an ancient sci-fi saga. He trotted forward and laid his hand on the little cylindrical table. The door's panel lit faintly to red, then to green, and opened slowly, revealing another bridge.

I stared in horror.

Groups of Carrier Forms, dozens of Combat Forms, and hundreds of Infection Forms were slowly stumbling our way. Heading somewhere, and determined to get through us.

I screamed.

7. The Tower

Absolutely hated the chapter . . . Not very good at all. Next one shall be

better, hopefully . . .

* * *

>In the face of hundreds of Flood, I turned and ran. The first thing that caught my eye was the pod-thing, floating above a small crevice that was lit just a few minutes ago. I jumped down there. <p>For a few seconds, all was still, until Alicia and then Sortan squeezed into my space. I was rather offended when Alicia huddled next to the Elite â€" I could see the message 'HELP ME' in his eyes.<p>

"Uh . . ." I began. "Alicia! You're smothering the frickin' alien! Get off him!"

"What?" She exclaimed.

"I _said, _you're _frickin'_ smothering him!"

"No I'm not!"

"He hates you, then. Get off him."

"There's no where else to go down here!"

"We-ell . . . There's me . . ."

I came to a few seconds later, my face burning. "Ouch . . ." But I quieted down as the door that we came out of opened. The Flood were entering the mausoleum.

"Where are they going?" I hissed to Sortan.

"To their leader, probably."

"_Flood_ have a _leader?_"

"I do not know."

Again, we lapsed into silence. The only light in the room was from the six cylindrical table things â€" like the ones that Cortana's hologram appeared from. I listened to the slow stampings of the Flood as they marched through the mausoleum.

It took a half-hour for all of them to get out. They seemed to be matching speeds at a slow stumble â€" I didn't wonder about this, but immediately stood the moment I knew they were all gone. Alicia was still fuming â€" I took her wrist and helped her up. Sortan rose.

Without a word, we trotted back to the door and stepped out onto the bridge once again. The green blood of dripping Flood left a long streak across the alien flooring. Other than that, the bridge was completely empty, a major difference from the first one we crossed.

Sortan continued forward, but I glanced out onto the city. Lights had gone out. The Pelicans had finally stopped coming. The structure in the center of the city was gone, and you could see explosions mushroom from the lower districts now and again.

It was still obvious this was a losing battle. The Flood was altering the atmosphere â€" spores could be seen everywhere. A huge, bulbous shape was growing along the ceiling of High Charity â€" like a pimple, or something, but brownish-green. Smaller versions covered the city, and even tinier could be seen growing on the bridge.

"The In Amber Clad's tower is on the other side of this one?" I asked Sortan, trudging on.

"Yes. We must move quickly. I don't think many surviving Brutes or Elites should be in the next tower . . . but I don't know about Flood. I doubt what we just passed was all of them, or even a small fraction, of all that must be coming from the human vessel."

Oh, great. More good news.

We crossed the bridge and entered the tower. The first thing I noticed was: it's dark. The first room just connected the bridge and the first real chamber; four doors surrounded us on every side. Sortan continued forward, activating his energy sword.

The next room once had a grav lift, but no longer. The power for this had failed, too â€" we couldn't go up or down in the tower. This room was mostly empty; in one corner, a dead Hunter lay quietly. Good.

Sortan led us forward and through the next door. By placing his palm on the cylindrical tables â€" he called them activation consoles â€" each door would get a bit of emergency power and open up for a while. The moment we walked into the next area â€" another valley â€" I knew we were in trouble. First, it was the Combat Form we immediately ran into. Sortan tore through it, but we marched to a ledge overlooking the artificial basin.

Below, five more Combat Forms slowly patrolled their territory. Brute bodies lay beneath them, some under the water of a small pond directly below us. Sortan immediately turned and ran down the slope. I waited excitedly for the Elite to appear â€" he did, Energy Sword blazing. Alicia and I began blazing off rounds with our rifles. I found my MA5B, while it fired a spread comparable to a fully automatic shotgun, was extremely good at taking down the Flood.

Once they were all dead, I jogged down the slope and joined Sortan. Alicia quietly followed me.

"Good!" I said. Sortan grunted.

"We better keep moving," he advised. "There are probably more in this valley, and I don't want to stick around for them to come."

As we went up the next slope, another Pelican flew by and clipped the edge of the valley. The sound caused me to leap visibly. Heart beating, we continued upwards as pieces of Pelican wing dropped into the artificial basin.

About two rooms later, we came to the energy bridge connecting us to the In Amber Clad. It was a beautiful sight: the huge crashed starship, jutting out majestically from the purple Covenant tower. Every now and then, some still-volatile piece of machinery would explode, sending a shower of sparks and steel onto the city

below.

The three of us stared. But there was still a problem: without any power to the tower, the energy bridge wasn't activated.

Without a word, Alicia stepped up to the interface near the bridge. The console was completely dark â€" she tried tapping a few buttons, but nothing happened. "It looks like we're going back in."

"Ohh crap," I sighed.

"There should be two command consoles on our level," Sortan told us, "by activating both of them, we should get the grav lift working . . . which can take us to the ground level and into the next tower."

"The command consoles won't let us activate the energy bridge?" Alicia asked, as I quietly began banging my head against a wall.

"No. Because most of the energy has shut down in the city, this means that most emergency power has been diverted to maintaining a breathable atmosphere. Using the command console, we can use a little power to activate the grav lift, but not the energy bridge, because the console was designed to be used for escape from the towers or entrance into the towers."

I didn't listen to him. I just wanted to be out of this damned city, maybe back on the Cairo . . . Or even on Earth. Yeah, in a nice, _soft_ bed . . . with chocolate! And _cookies_ â€" _

"We'll need to split up for this." Sortan commanded.

"_Noooooooo_!" I moaned.

Ignoring me, Alicia replied, "Okay. I'll hit one command console, you hit another . . . Nathan will head to the grav lift and tell us when its working. We'll meet there."

I stopped banging my head against the wall, and quietly walked inside the tower. Inside, Sortan added, "I'll head left, you head right, human. The command consoles should be on opposite sides of the tower."

They walked off. I stepped through the frontal door and began moving back into the tower. I assumed they wanted me to go to the first grav lift we came across, and that I did. Marching forward, I was sure that I'd run into something soon enough . . .

8. The Grav Lift

Heart thumping away, I crept through the hall and doorways of the tower. Sortan and Alicia were probably at the command consoles by now, though the ensign hadn't said anything over the comm.

So far, I hadn't met any Flood â€" we had already taken this path, so those that were left over from their little "march" were dead. Still, every time I entered one of the artificial valleys I panicked.

Finally, I entered the grav lift room, and sat down on the curved architecture. I felt sick, and wondered what a Covenant lavatory looked like. There were many different species . . . If there was a different bathroom for each . . .

Suddenly, something beeped, and I jumped, my heart racing again. I reached for the comm. After finding it, my finger pressed the correct buttons and I raised it to my ear. Alicia immediately said, "Okay, my console is good. Is the grav lift working?"

I glanced at the circular hole in the floor of the room. "Nope, not yet. Maybe Sortan hasn't finished yet."

"Maybe," Alicia said. I could detect the slightest hint of fear on the edge of her voice.

"Seen any Flood up there? Everything alright?"

"Shut up, Nathan. I'll be there in a few minutes." Testy, testy.

Sortan didn't have a human comm., of course. Hopefully he would show up before Alicia arrived. He was probably finishing up just now . . .

No such luck. Ten minutes later, Alicia entered the room hurriedly, grasping the BR55 Battle Rifle. Immediately on task, she asked, "Where's Sortan?"

"Dunno," I replied, studying her face in the darkness. I could make out a grimace. She turned, and paced back to the doorway.

"I'll head to the second console, then."

Alone. Again, I thought despairingly. "Okay," I said aloud with a blank expression.

She trotted off, and I sat quietly once more, listening to the sounds of the darkness. The spores in the air were increasing â€" I could feel my breath getting shallower. Breathe masks, or something, would be incredibly useful right now, I thought, examining the ceiling.

More of the greenish-grayish blobs were forming throughout the tower. They were probably used for the Flood to manufacture Infection Forms. Excellent, I thought sarcastically, just as the lights blinked on overhead. A glow came from the grav lift shaft, like something was ascending it very quickly. The light reached the top, and soon a purple glow filled the room.

Picking up my comm., I asked Alicia if she had found Sortan. No answer. I tried again: no answer. Finally, I put away the comm. Hesitantly; feeling panic starting to well up, I distracted myself by glancing down the shaft. As I did, a sort of wavy-like noise came from the grav lift, and I could see something rapidly ascending it.

"Crap!" I said aloud, stumbling away from lift. A moment later, as I rushed to ready my assault rifle, a Carrier Form spurted from the

shaft with such force it hit the ceiling and bounced onto the ground, already swelling up. I cried out and backed away as it exploded.

I knew the small Infection Forms were lethal to humans, since I didn't have a shield generator. I held down the trigger of the assault rifle until the little bastards were dead. Exhaling with relief, I sat down again, just as two Combat Forms were thrown out of the lift. While they struggled to stand up, I turned and ran.

Unluckily, they caught sight of me before I dashed away into the next chamber. Once the two Flood forms had separated themselves from each other, they began running after me at such speeds I was a tiny bit envious. But that was the suicidal tiny bit, and I continued on.

It took about three chambers of running for them to wear me out. Spinning around, I raised my assault rifle and fired on them; one went down, but the other leapt and its tentacle-infested arm slapped me in the chest. With a whimper of pain, I went down, but raised my assault rifle and depleted my clip into the thing's body.

In pain and terror, I studied my wound. Three lashes, visible through my torn fatigues: bleeding badly, and with a slight green touch to the edges. Scrambling around my belt, I found a medical disinfectant. Closing my eyes tightly, I sprayed the stuff of nightmares onto my wound.

Arrgh, I thought. Through the blinding pain I watched as the green tint on the edge of the lashes melted away.

Exhausted, I lay my head back and drifted away into unconsciousness .
. .

9. Reunion

Deep in the heart of a dark tower in the Flood-infested Covenant worldship, something went "Aargh."

I opened my eyes to darkness. The last of the lighting had failed; luckily, the Covenant life-support systems were still running, since I could still breathe. With effort and a lot of agony, I pulled myself to my feet.

My fatigues were red with blood, which explained why I was feeling so faint. Trying to remember where I was and what had happened, I stumbled through a door and saw the body of a dead Grunt. A sudden spark of inspiration led me to an idea " I shakily approached the corpse and removed the methane breathing system. Pulling a knob on one end of the methane tank, I released the gasses into the air.

Walking away, I looked around for some kind of vent. There: A small portal, where the spores in the air were being disturbed. I stumbled to it and pushed the tank's opening into the portal and waited a few minutes. Once I believed it was finished, I closed the tank again and locked it onto my armor. With a feeling of mild disgust, I fixed the mouthpiece on. I hoped there weren't any diseases I could catch from a Grunt.

At least, now, the spores wouldn't kill me. Sortan would probably be fine, but Alicia was in danger. I could hardly see three meters ahead of him due to the spores.

That finished, I kneeled down. After a moment of thought, I fell face-flat onto the cool Covenant floors, and began to assess my situation. Alicia was looking for Sortan, but had apparently found the controls to the grav lift. My best options were: run, and probably die, or find Alicia, and probably die.

I settled on finding Alicia, so I could die with a fellow human. Feeling incredibly depressed, I tried the comm. Again, no answer; I hopped through the sliding doorway that I found the dead Grunt in. Passing it, I headed in the vague direction I had last seen the ensign go in.

As I moved on, the pain in my wound increased. I felt it lightly with my gloved fingers; the slash from the Combat Form's tentacles had ripped through armor and fatigues. Good thing the disinfectant had worked, or I might be dead, or worse, by know.

After ten minutes of uninterrupted stumbling, I heard a female cry of pain. Mixed feelings immediately boiled up, such as: 'Yes!', 'THANK YOU GOD!', and, 'ah CRAP!'

I hopped toward the sound at top speed, until I came into a small chamber with one level and a console in the center. Hovering over the console was a flickering image of the tower, and I could see the highlighted, glowing shaft of the grav lift in the middle of the image.

I mentally cheered again as I caught sight of Alicia, sitting with her back against the wall. She was cradling her arm. I stepped toward her, and for once she didn't glare at me or insult me. Kneeling beside the ensign, I inspected the arm: her forearm was clearly broken. I winced in sympathy.

"Nathan," she whispered; I had to strain to hear, "Sortan is just outside. He's hurt, too, but there shouldn't be any Flood nearby." I noticed her eyeing my oxygen tank.

I told her I'd be back and I stepped outside. Three dead Combat Forms surrounded the prone form of Sortan. He was unconscious, and I ignored him for the time being, instead grabbing a sniper rifle from one of the corpses. Quickly, I broke off the barrel and snapped it in two. Afterwards, I searched the dead Flood for magazines, and found six for different weapons. I returned to Alicia, mentally praising my own ingeniousness.

Kneeling next to her, I ripped off the sleeve of my fatigues. I set the two halves of the sniper rifle barrel on either side of her broken arm; then, I placed two magazines one each side to connect them. Finally, I wrapped my fatigues around it to finish the splint.

Finished, I admired my handiwork. "Thanks, Nathan," Alicia whispered, eyes closed. I appreciated the gratitude in her voice; maybe she was finally accepting me.

I returned outside and kneeled beside Sortan. He had taken two 12.7MM

bullets just below the chest plate. Glad the Elite was unconscious, I dug out the bullets with a combat knife I found on one of the former-Marine Combat Forms. Hoping nothing vital was damaged, I disinfected the wound and wrapped the leg of one of the Combat Form's fatigues around his midsection.

Aware that I couldn't lift him and wouldn't dare drag him, I left him outside and returned to Alicia. She was now sleeping. I sat down next to the nearly dead Covenant door, and rested my head against the curved wall.

As I sat, I tried to recall the last time I had gotten a true wink of sleep. Sometime before Cairo Station came under attack, I remembered. Closing my eyes, I let myself doze off . . .

I awoke not an hour later. Sortan was awake now, sitting next to Alicia. He, too, noticed my oxygen system and blinked at it. After inquiring about it, I described how I had done it and took note of the vent in the chamber.

Telling Sortan to watch over Alicia, I trotted outside to the Combat Form bodies. The path they were laying on arced around the tower and eventually ended up at either the energy bridge or the connection to the Mausoleum.

I ran down the pathway until I came across a former battleground; obviously, it had been large-scale for such a small space. Three-dozen Grunts were dead; the Elites had already been dragged away by the Flood; around twenty Jackals were scattered around; seven Brutes lay among the hill of corpses. The blood loss was massive; I felt my day-old lunch well up in my stomach. Ignoring the stench, I separated a Grunt from its methane tank and disinfected the mouthpiece. As I ran back to the others, I emptied the tank of methane.

When I arrived, I immediately used the vent to fill the tank full of oxygen. Alicia was awake now, too. I explained the device to her and helped the ensign affix it to her unisex bridge crew uniform (with the use of the Combat Forms' fatigues).

Finally, the three of us sat down, together again. "The grav lift is working now," I began.

"Good," Alicia said, "We can now head back down into the lower districts and move on to the next tower."

Sortan, still pained by his wound, muttered, "The Flood will be all over the lower districts. We'll have to move carefully."

I noticed something. "What happened to your Energy Sword?"

He eyed me. "Five Combat Forms came at me. The Energy Sword's power was low, but I managed to kill two of them before it disappeared. My shields were depleted, and one of the parasite managed to shoot me . . ."

"And then I came in," Alicia added. "What happened to you?" She asked, suddenly noticing my wound. I smiled at the worried tone.

"Ah, nothing," I grinned. "Just one of the Combat Form's tentacles. A few came up the lift."

"Does that mean there will be more in the tower?" Alicia inquired.

Sortan replied, "We will take the grav lift straight to the bottom."

"Good," I whispered, looking vaguely at the wall. Time to start out next cheerful adventure. Even better, I was now the only one not badly wounded.

And the spores were increasing. The Flood was altering the atmosphere
. . .

10. Reunion Tour

The grav lift was still glowing when we arrived. The green 'Flood Blood' surrounded the portal where the Carrier Form had exploded; smaller blots also pointed out where I had killed the Infection Forms. Limbs of the Combat Forms were also scattered across the rooms that I had run through; indeed, I also came across the red blotches of my own blood.

I followed behind Sortan; Alicia followed me. Four of the doors we passed had to be forced open. That meant that the last of High Charity's emergency power was failing. I kept this cheery thought in my mind as we floated down the lift. It was three long minutes before we arrived on the ground level.

Sortan landed correctly, feet-first. I fell on top of him, causing both of us to crumble into a heap. Alicia landed heavily on top; I grunted as she carefully stepped away from our tangled mess and inspected the chamber.

I separated myself from the Elite and stood. The grav lift failed a few seconds later, emptying the room of light.

In the darkness, Alicia triggered a flashlight.

"What the hell?" I grumbled. "Why didn't you use that earlier?"

"When?" she replied innocently. Her voice was muffled by the oxygen tank's mouthpiece; I realized mine was, too. "There has been sufficient light until now."

"Whatever," I answered, following the spotlight. The room was empty except for a few corpses. All was silent, except for the muttering of Sortan.

"Where to, now?" I asked him.

"We're near an exit on the opposite side of the tower we want to be at. We could go around, through the lower districts, or we could go through the tower."

The lower districts would be full of Flood, right? I asked myself.

I glanced at Alicia. "Through the tower?" I inquired.

"I guess so . . ." she whispered, squinting into the darkness.

"Okay, off we go," I said cheerfully, walking further into the tower. They followed me; I was the one with the gun, right?

We hadn't made two rooms before we encountered the first of the Flood on the ground level. It was a long hallway with slightly raised platforms on either sides; Sortan told me it was one of the Grunt sleeping quarters. Above us were balconies that once were hidden by glass, which was now smashed all over the floor. Dead Brutes, Grunts, and Jackals lay in pieces. Both Covenant and human weapons joined them in the debris.

I readied my assault rifle and checked my ammo. I was down to two clips left, including the one in the rifle. _It might be time to pass it up_, I thought. We stepped into the room and made our way through the next bend before we saw the five Combat Forms. I immediately fired on them; Alicia used a Magnum in her good arm, and Sortan fired a Plasma Rifle. Three Combat Forms came close enough to lash out at me, and I managed to fill two full of lead before the magazine was depleted. I dropped the MA5B and grabbed a nearby Brute Plasma Rifle. Sortan had stumbled into one of the Grunt's quarters, and Alicia was taking potshots from behind a Covenant weapons crate.

The Combat Form leapt at me, its claws ripping at my skin. I tried to push it away, but it was too strong. Finally, I managed to jam the Brute Plasma Rifle into the folds of the dead skin. I held down the trigger, even once the Combat Form collapsed against me. I held down the trigger until it overheated, burning my hand. Feeling pain and fatigue wash over me, I lay back and drifted into unconsciousness again.

I didn't know how much time had passed; I just felt the pain, and the stifling, crushing weight of the Combat Form. When I awoke, there was light: directly in my eyes. It pulled away, and I saw Alicia's face. She smiled, and I immediately felt better. Sortan was standing to the side, watching, and past him I could see the city of High Charity.

"What happened?" I muttered, voice hoarse.

"You fainted, or something. Got a little beat up," Alicia explained.

I reached for my face, and felt a deep slash across it. Thankfully, it missed my eye, but still reached from my chin to the ear. Alicia had disinfected it and bandaged the awkward wound up as best as possible. I could also feel a few more scratches across my arms and armor.

"There's going to be a few scars," Alicia continued.

"Yeah." I mumbled, "Where are we?"

"Outside of the tower, in the lower districts. The _In Amber Clad _is close now."

_That must be where the light is coming from, _I thought, looking up. Indeed, the massive figure of the burning starship cast a glowing radiance over some of the city.

"There are still a few battles going on inside the city," Sortan rumbled. "Apparently, some of the Elites from destroyed cruisers fled here."

"What?" I said, rubbing my eyes and pushing myself into a sitting position.

"There is a space battle going on outside, between the Elites and the Brutes," Sortan explained. "Now, we must be going. The next tower isn't far."

I stood, getting quite annoyed of being on the ground. There were a few buildings around us, crushed by the fall of debris. There were Elite bodies, too, which surprised me. The Flood hadn't absorbed them yet.

I could see the tower ahead. The street led straight to it, occasionally illuminated by plasma grenade explosions. The Covenant and the Flood was fighting nearby.

The three of us marched ahead. Remembering the last time I had looked in the mirror, I casually glanced at myself and laughed inwardly. I also remembered when I had first seen Ensign Hartman on the bridge. We looked like a duo of savages. Even Sortan looked beat-up: the bandage around his midsection; dents and scuffs in his armor; even his shoulder plates were missing their tips.

An explosion directly ahead of us interrupted my thoughts. A Spectre roared out of an alley between two prefabs, quickly followed by eight Combat Forms. The red, vaguely pear-shaped Covenant vehicle doubled back and ran through the Flood, causing three of them to explode from the sudden impact. The turret on the Spectre spun around and spewed plasma at the remaining Flood. The creatures turned and followed it back into the alley.

We sprinted past the alley, continuing forward down the street. As we drew closer to the tower, I saw an increasing amount of Flood: Carrier Forms, looming on the prefabs' 'rooftops'; Infection Forms, pouring into and out of broken portholes. Combat Forms ran in their awkward sprint through alleys and over the buildings. Occasionally a Ghost would fly past; I felt we were extremely lucky to not have been noticed.

Three Flood-piloted Ghosts ambushed us just before the entrance into the tower. I ducked into an alleyway, confirmed the others were following, and headed down the narrow space. I stumbled into the next street, just as I saw a Phantom speeding towards us. Sortan pulled me back into the alley.

"That Phantom will kill us!" I squeaked in the darkness.

Sortan poked his head out and glanced at it as it began to hover over the street, expelling Elites and the occasional Hunter pair downwards. "Have you thought out how we will get to the human ship inside the tower?" He asked.

"Yeah," I said, "Take the - " and then it hit me. He was right. We couldn't take the grav lift; there wasn't a command console on the ground floor.

Sighing, Alicia asked Sortan, "How do you propose we get to the _In Amber Clad, _then?"

"I'm going to take you prisoner." Sortan growled.

Two minutes later, I narrowed my eyes and frowned deeply as the Elite marched as toward the Phantom, which still hovered above the street. Alicia was playing a good act, struggling immensely.

Sortan took us just under the portal into the Phantom before another Elite, this one clad in black armor, marched up to us and rumbled, "What are these?"

"Human prisoners," Sortan answered, looking down at the black-armored alien. It wilted under his gaze, and meekly answered, "Go right ahead, Field Commander. Our Arbiter - "

Sortan stopped in mid-step. "The Arbiter? He is alive?"

"Yes, Field Commander. He is on Halo. As I was saying, the Arbiter has allied himself with the humans, _temporarily - _"

"Why?" boomed Sortan, just before realizing he was doing the same. I snickered quietly.

"They have helped him, in some ways. The Arbiter has killed Tartarus."

I didn't know who Tartarus was, but it was obviously important. Sortan marched us away quietly and released us from his grip, just before we floated into the Phantom.

The inside was dark and, unsurprisingly, purple. A few Elites prepared themselves in the corners, loading Carbines and such. Sortan left us in the chamber and walked to the cockpit. I looked around, wondering if one of the Elites were going to kill me unexpectedly or something.

I gasped as one of the Elites glanced at me and lowered his head in acknowledgement. Quietly, he threw a loaded Carbine at me. I raised my eyebrows at the alien, who simply returned to his work.

Sortan joined us a moment later. "The Phantom will drop by the human ship. I have also acquired us a Spec Ops squad."

"Oh, great, more aliens," I grumbled. Sortan gave me a meaningful glance, and the Phantom rose into the air, heading towards the _In Amber Clad_.

11. The Fighter

Obsidian Thirteen: Yeah, I've been updating as quickly as I can â€" I'm looking forward to finishing this. And this is the final chapter!

Oh, Longsword fighters don't have slipspace drives? I'll fix, it then
. . .

XXXXXXXXXX

The Phantom hovered over an opening in the hull of the _In Amber Clad._ Four Grunts went down into the opening, two holding turrets. Three Spec Ops Elites quickly followed them. A moment later, Sortan dropped down, then Alicia, and finally, me.

I landed heavily, and looked around. Fires and explosions had blackened the interior, and the bulkheads were ripped open. The two Spec Ops Grunts with turrets had secured the makeshift LZ, setting up their weapons in the broken doorways.

The Elites secured the area, and the room became the DeMilitarized Zone. Sortan began barking out orders, and then approached me. "Where are we to go?"

Alicia hijacked my response. "We are going to the reactors. After we're finished there, we'll return here and head to the hangars."

"What do you want my Elites to do?" Sortan continued.

"Send them to clear the path to the hangars. I believe you should go with them," Alicia responded with a blank expression. "Leave the Grunts here."

Sortan nodded, and began speaking in an alien tongue again. I pulled Alicia away, and quietly screamed, "What are you talking about? We'll need help if you want to detonate the reactors!"

She calmly replied, "If the Elites find out about this, they won't be happy. We won't be taking them with us when we escape."

"You're ruthless. How are we going to detonate the reactors? Don't we need the captain's transponder on the bridge?"

"I've been on the bridge for a long time, and I know how to hack like the best AI out there. Plus, Cortana was serving as the AI on the _In Amber Clad_, which means there won't be one here. And that means that it will be much easier to outwit the computer. And if my hacking doesn't work, we can set a charge on the reactors and time-blow it."

"I don't like this," I admitted. "We'll be leaving Sortan behind, then?"

"Yes," she said emotionlessly. Sortan approached us again, with the three Elites by his side.

"Okay, humans, we've decided to send one Elite with you. I'll take the other two to find your hangar." He nodded at us, and I had a feeling I wouldn't see him again as the tall Elite marched away. Two of the black-armored aliens followed him, leaving one behind.

"Can you understand me?" I asked him slowly.

"Yes, human," it answered impassively.

"Do you have a name?" Alicia asked.

It turned its head slowly toward her. "Yes . . . You can call me . . . Sankah."

I bobbed my head for a few seconds before turning and heading through the former doorway. Alicia quickly took the lead, and the Spec Ops Elite followed me. I noticed that he had a Beam Rifle â€" the Covenant Sniper Rifle â€" strapped to his armor, and a Plasma Rifle in both spindly hands. I held a Covenant Carbine, but Alicia was weaponless.

She led us into the next room, which was covered in blood. Three Combat Forms were standing motionless in by the opposite doorway; Sankah leapt ahead of us and fired on them. I was amazed by his skill; they went down in seconds. But the early appearance of Flood told me that we would face a lot of resistance.

In the next room, security station B-01, we came across six Infection Forms gnawing on human corpses. The Elite and I dispatched them easily enough. I remembered this room: it had been the station Sergeant Major ZoÃ« Stevens had made her last stand. There was a shotgun and some ammo near one of the surveillance consoles. Picking up the weaponry, I glanced at the screens: they were all blank.

"Let's keep going," Alicia ordered, also picking up a weapon: an SMG, which she held in her good arm. I followed her, and the bulky alien did the same. We passed through a commons room, and then another security station before arriving at the shipping station, a cavernous chamber with a few lights still gleaming above. There was a large elevator that took us slowly downwards, to the ground floor, where five Combat Forms greeted us. My shotgun dealt with them, and we continued through the door. After passing through three empty rooms, we took a left. The darkness was overwhelming, now â€" I could barely see two feet in front of me. Alicia pulled out the flashlight and led us onward.

It became worse once we entered the maintenance shafts. Flood were everywhere. Sankah took the lead, following Alicia's orders. Combat Forms leapt out at us from the shadows, and I took up the rear as more began to follow us. As we entered the final maintenance shaft before the reactors, dozens of Carrier Forms appeared between the reactor and us.

Sankah immediately leapt at them. I assumed his train of thought was: these things look weak; it'll be a waste of ammo if I don't just beat them down. I tried to yell stop him, but one Plasma Rifle already connected with the hide of a Carrier Form. It dropped, and began bulging. I pulled Alicia away, and ran, just before the first Flood Carrier Form exploded. The others quickly followed, and there was a huge explosion from within as the chemicals used to power the reactor â€" that went through pipes around the maintenance shaft - combusted. Alicia waved her flashlight in the direction of the noise, where I watched as the shaft collapsed on the unfortunate Elite and the Infection Forms.

"_Shit!_" Alicia screamed. "How are we going to get to the reactor, now?"

"We can't, Alicia," I said sadly. "We'll just have double back. Cortana could still be on High Charity, right? If something goes wrong, she'll detonate the reactors."

"How can you say something like that?" She cried, turning on me. "The Flood will encompass High Charity, and use it to spread across the galaxy. We need to stop them!"

"No, we don't," I whispered soothingly. "It will all work out. It is our job to survive."

"You blasted _coward!_" The ensign screamed at me, before disappearing into the darkness, switching off the flashlight. I was alone again, but I quickly followed in the direction she stamped off in.

"Alicia â€" wait!" I called after her. "Think logically!" I tried. No answer. I had to follow my own advice now: survive. Damn it.

I retraced my steps as best I could in the darkness. I felt along the walls, following the path that we had taken until I reached the shipping station. I tried the console to begin the elevator, but it didn't work: it might have been connected to the maintenance shaft. The wall the elevator moved down was slanted, and had grooves in it: I hurriedly climbed upwards.

I took a detour and arrived at the armory I had defended so long ago. No corpses, but there were dropped helmets and blood of both humans and Flood. There was more ammunition for my shotgun, and plenty other weapons, but I decided to just keep the M90.

It felt like a walk down memory lane. Well, a broken, battered, and burned memory lane. I thought about where Alicia could go and realized that the bridge was probably destroyed when the _In Amber Clad_ crashed.

I finally came across the path to the Longsword fighter bay. There were quite a few Combat Form casualties and even one Elite corpse. Sortan had come through here. I jogged down the path of destruction until I came to the fighter bay, where I heard sounds of battle. Inside, the two Elites were fighting against a _lot _of Flood. I couldn't count them; I just watched in amazement as Sortan slashed through the hordes of Combat Forms with a newly acquired Energy Sword.

The other Elite lost his shields; I had become familiar with the burst of energy as they dissipated. The many tentacles instantly devoured him. The gruesome image shook me out of the reverie; I screamed to Sortan, "Sortan! I'm here!" I rushed into the fray, pulling the trigger and pumping as quickly as I could. The chamber emptied of shells; I dropped behind a tower of boxes to manually reload.

I leapt back out. More Combat Forms were dropping from the dark rafters; I knew this battle couldn't be won. Sortan kept fighting, but his shields were constantly being hit. A few of the Combat Forms turned on me, but I took care of them calmly.

Sortan yelled to me, "Human! Where is the female?"

"Don't know!" I replied, loading a shell into another Combat Form, point-blank. It dropped.

"We need to get inside your fighter ship!" He said, referring to the Longswords. Three of the huge craft remained in the bay.

"Its impossible with all these Flood!" I called back, throwing a grenade into a slew of approaching aliens. It exploded, bringing most of them down. At least the Combat Forms in the immediate area were thinning out; I noticed Sortan's shields recharge. I began back-stepping toward the Longsword, gunning down multiple foes as they approached me. Sortan didn't follow; he just kept fighting.

"Sortan! Come on!" I yelled at him. He didn't answer, as three more Combat Forms dropped from the rafters. They must be congregating in here, so they could escape from the In Amber Clad in Pelicans and Longswords.

Suddenly, the lights flickered on above, illuminating the Flood in the rafters. Carrier Forms watched with eyeless gazes. Combat Forms prepared to leap down on us. I didn't see any Infection Forms, thankfully.

I looked up into the bay station, the room where officers commanded the Longswords going in and out. I could see a figure: Alicia! She immediately left the room.

I looked back down, where Sortan was still slashing at six Combat Forms. He stood beside four crates, splashed with Flood Blood. He stabbed through two more Combat Forms when suddenly the Energy Sword failed. I knew my lifeline had died, then, too: I turned and ran towards the Longsword. As I stood in the doorway into the Phantom, I watched as Sortan swung ineffectually at the Flood. His shields failed, and the Carrier Forms dropped from the rafters as if on cue. The Combat Forms stepped back, allowing hundreds of Infection Forms to smother the hapless Elite.

As Sortan dropped to his knees, Alicia suddenly burst into the room through the doorway I had once been in. I had totally forgotten about her!

I jumped out of the Longsword, sprinting towards her. Two Combat Forms leapt at me; I loaded them full of lead. Alicia ran towards me. I grabbed her arm once we came close enough; then, we both turned around and ran to the Longsword. I felt a headache coming on.

The Combat Forms were regrouping, and soon following us. I stopped and pushed the ensign towards the fighter. She ran on, also stopping in the doorway.

I gunned down the Combat Forms easy enough. And then the Infection Forms came at me. The scatter shot of the shotgun took a few down; the rest leapt onto me. I pulled them off and flung them down as they vied for a position on my spine. After those on my body were dead, I leapt to my feet and sprinted once more to the Longsword, leaping in and closing the hatch. Alicia was now gone, disappearing into the depths of the Longsword.

I lay quietly, until the Longsword lifted off. We were safe, now, I hoped. I was exhausted, but I knew Alicia would probably need my help. I stood and jogged to the cockpit, as the Longsword circled above the city. I sat down in the co-pilot's chair.

"Where do we go now?" Alicia asked, no longer calmly.

"There!" I pointed towards the opening in the ceiling of High Charity, the one that the Prophet of Truth's vessel had escaped through. It had once been illuminated with a bright light, but the light was now gone. I hoped it was still open.

We moved upwards, towards the spherical hole. The ship began to shake, and the ensign asked, "Are you sure this is an opening?"

The Longsword came closer. As we were within half a kilometer of hole, it opened up, slowly. But the ship it was made for was much bigger; we passed through the slit of an opening and disappeared into the next huge, cylindrical pressure chamber.

It was indeed huge, large enough for Truth's ship to fly through while the first opening closed, and the second one opened. Alicia piloted the Longsword towards the other side, and moved it through the portal into space.

I gasped as we flew out of High Charity. A massive space battle unfolded before us. Covenant cruisers, firing on each other; Seraph fighters chasing Seraph fighters; and Delta Halo below. Balls of plasma and long, deadly lasers speared empty space. Alicia turned the Longsword fighter away from High Charity, and accelerated. It wasn't long before we were in the war zone. Seraph fighters zoomed past us; two of them fell in behind us, and I knew we were in trouble. The Longsword evasively dived toward a nearby carrier. The fighter flew along the hull, just as the Seraph fighters fired their weaponry. The plasma missiles curved toward us, but splashed against the carrier's shields. I grinned.

The Longsword soon cleared the carrier, flying into clear space. "Where are we going to go?" I asked Alicia.

"Nowhere else to go but down, now," she answered, moving the Longsword toward Delta Halo . . .

****THE END****

End
file.